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# The maroon boxer briefs: exploring erotic reflexivity in interview research

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## Abstract

This article addresses both participants' and researchers' erotic arousal during in-depth interviewing and explores how these emotions can be both productive and informative. I briefly overview the scarce literature available and propose a new framework where arousal is considered as playful. I provide three cases from my research where erotic arousal was informative. These reflect on participants' and researcher's arousal through interview transcripts and research journal. I suggest that ignoring these instances overlooks important sources of information about the interview setting and propose ways in which these emotions can be included as informative insights in the analysis of research. Throughout this article, I also reflect on the ways in which erotic arousal is embodied and, thus, not always rational, and the limits of reflexivity. Finally, I conclude by acknowledging some of the complications of erotic arousal before suggesting its benefits.

## Keywords

Interview, erotic arousal, affect, method

A rallying cry for the feminist movement has been the slogan  
'the personal is political'. To that notion should be added the acknowledgment  
that 'the personal is also professional'.

(Bolton, 1995: 162)

What happens when we encounter the erotic in the interview and when interviews become erotic encounters for our participants, ourselves or both? How do we combine prized professional detachment with arousal? At their essence, these questions challenge the personal/professional divide. Through a discussion of erotically charged interviews we can theorize how, as Bolton says above, 'the personal is also professional.' This article reflects on several experiences where the erotic made an appearance in the

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interview interaction and suggests a language to discuss these instances. In addition, I propose how we can think of these encounters and explore their influence in the production of information.

I have conducted 22 interviews with bugchasers, gay men who eroticize human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), talk about it online and, sometimes, seek to get infected. All participants were self-labelled bugchasers, aged 28 to 69, from a variety of countries (including US, UK, Australia, Mexico, Philippines and Canada). They agreed to be interviewed over Skype and we talked for 60 min on average: they signed a consent form via email beforehand and consent was reasserted at the beginning of the interview. They were familiar with the general topic of the interview but not particular questions. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed: there was no video recording and the audio files were deleted after transcription. All interviews took place in English, except for one in Spanish (not in this article). A journal of the interviews was kept separately and anonymized. The use of Skype has been described by Deakin and Wakefield (2013) as providing flexibility, preserving rapport and giving participants different levels of 'exposure' to choose from. Hanna (2012) has described how it can help avoid travel, and Seitz (2015) described how to preserve intimacy and remain attentive to body language in online interviewing. Skype interviews had several benefits: first, participants were already familiar with using Skype (this could be for professional reasons, personal or sexual reasons since online sex is not uncommon among bugchasers given their geographical spread). Second, this method allowed for enhanced privacy: participants could do the interview at a time of their convenience and, thanks to mobile data networks, from a place of their choice (including their cars and rooms).

The interviews were lightly structured around several 'thematic areas' (i.e. sexual history, use of social media, views on pornography, relationship to medical institutions, etc.). The content of the interviews was ostensibly sexual: we talked about what sex they do, who they have sex with, how frequently. . . While the interviews are about sex, they were not framed as sexual encounters from the onset. For instance, when asked about how it feels to talk about his sexual fantasies in an interview, Anacleto<sup>1</sup> (28 year, male, Texas) argues: 'It's more polite, I guess. It's more polite and I don't use the same words. [ . . . ] I liked it. It was different, not being sleazy or dominant or submissive, just two people having a conversation about it without going to jerk off.' Anacleto echoes Vörös' (2015) findings that participants may use euphemistic language to prevent the embarrassment or shame associated with disclosing sexual practices outside of a sexual setting. This is further supported by Luke (28 year, male, London), who comments that talking about bugchasing in the interview 'it's quite nice, it's much more reflexive, it actually gets me thinking a bit more. It's set in a different context, like, yeah. . . I actually really enjoyed it.'

While the interviews were not intended as erotic encounters, 'it is often difficult to talk about sex in a serious unsexy manner' (Green et al., 1993: 635). Thus, this article uses the term 'erotic' to refer to the multiple ways in which interviews may become 'charged' with sexual desires and arousal<sup>2</sup>. This 'erotic charge' can occur through 'sex talk' but also through non-verbal channels: body language, tone and pitch, clothing, setting, camera angles and frames, background noises, etc. Ellis argues that ethnographic writings 'may be accurate in terms of who said what when. But [ . . . ] they are not

truthful, at least not in the sense of truthfully conveying the emotional experience that occurred in the interview' (2004: 123). In this way, omitting the erotic charge of an interview – in both its verbal and non-verbal forms – is misrepresenting the encounter.

Neither all interviews nor only those about sex are prone to being erotically charged. In this project, three reasons contributed to the interviews being particularly erotic. First, the interviews dealt with sexual fantasies and practices and took the form of Skype interactions. Bugchasers frequently engage in online sexual encounters through chatting or video chat. Thus, the format of the interviews was not dissimilar to participants' sexual practices. Second, after 3 years of research on the subject, I have a comprehensive knowledge of bugchasing, which frequently made participants feel/question whether I was a peer member of the community. For the record, I am not. Third, I had seen the participants naked. Before conducting the interview, I reviewed participants with Twitter profiles (those who contacted me through Twitter) to better understand their online interactions and prepare the interview. Several of the participants had uploaded sexually explicit pictures or videos of themselves to this platform.

This article continues the debate initiated by Thomas and Williams' (2016) exploration of the multi-pronged influence of sexual desire on research which concludes that desires are not 'irrelevant or incidental to the research process' (93). While they suggest that sexual desires influence everything from the choice of project to writing, I will focus on interactions happening in the interview context. In doing so, I follow the lead of Huysamen (2018), who explores the potential for interviews to become erotic encounters for participants and how this complicates the dynamics of power. This article, however, goes beyond this by acknowledging, first, that erotic arousal can happen to both participants *and researchers* and, second, that erotic charge is not necessarily a negative dynamic to be neutralized and silenced but that it rather merits exploration. I suggest that we need an increased awareness of our sexual and emotional responses during research as a way of accessing a further layer of information about those encounters.

In the following pages, I provide an overview of the available literature on the presence of the sexual in interview settings. I argue that research has, at times, acknowledged the presence of erotic charge but generally has failed to consider the researcher as a subject of these emotions. I then propose three cases: the first, Josh's interview, continues a traditional approach to erotic arousal and sexual language as a negotiation of power but also explores how these dynamics can be productive. Then, through Trey's interview, I propose how the researcher's erotic arousal exists in the interview setting and try to untangle its complications. Finally, I use excerpts from my research journal regarding Gallo's interview to highlight the need of reflexivity that includes both participants' and our own emotions.

## A silence in the literature

This article is framed within a reflexive turn in sociology piloted by figures such as Plummer (1975, 1995, 2003, 2012), Coffey (1999) and Ellis (1995, 2004). In her methodological book on autoethnography, Ellis asks: 'what is the role of the "I" in ethnography? [. . .] what about the "I" of the researcher, the part that not only looks but is looked back at, that not only acts but is acted back upon by those in her focus? Is ethnography

only about the other? Isn't ethnography also a relation [. . .]?' (2004: xix). This sort of reflexivity, which frequently starts by locating the researcher in relation to the researched group, has been applied to a number of areas. For example, Moreman and Non Grata (2011) talk about the experience of navigating education while being undocumented, Moreira and Diversi (2011) explore racism in higher education and Ehrenreich (2000) discusses social class in her autoethnography of maids-to-order. Disability and illness have also featured prominently (Green, 2002; Ronai, 1996; Tillmann, 1996) as well as discussions of age and ageism (McNichol, 2018; Rambo, 2005). Work has also been done on embodied experiences. Orbach, when talking about her relationship as a psychotherapist to her clients, argues: 'bodily sensations were as valid and useful as any others' (1999: 18).

Of particular relevance are works in which embodiment is discussed in relation to the fieldwork and interview setting (see Cherry, 1996; Kiensinger, 1998; Tillmann, 2015). Most frequently, embodiment is used to highlight negative affect: Barrett-Fox (2011) talks about her struggles to conduct research among members of the Westboro Baptist Church and Kiensinger (1998) uses embodiment to complement the narrative of an interview about bulimia and abuse. Others, such as Kleinman and Copp (1993) and Emerald and Carpenter (2015), have talked about the effects of fieldwork on their health. While embodiment can be used to negotiate challenging topics and situations, little work has used this approach to reflect on positive experiences. In this way, perhaps the only not entirely negative approaches are Plummer's (2012) discussion of illness and recovery, Berry's work on embodiment in gay bathhouses (2007) and Preciado's (2013) work on pharmacopornography.

Research about sexual emotions or erotic arousal in fieldwork comes mainly from anthropology (Kulick and Willson, 1995), sociology (Plummer, 1995) and geography (Cupples, 2002; Killick, 1995). I want to highlight a body of work devoted to the negotiations of power between female interviewers and male interviewees when researching topics related to sexuality and gender. Green et al. (1993) focus on male interviewees using harassment to contest female interviewers' power. Gailey and Prohaska (2011) discuss how feminist researchers should react 'when participants make sexist, classist, or other derogatory remarks about marginalized groups of people' (2011: 378) and how the researcher's reaction could jeopardize the continuity of the interview. Interestingly, they also comment at length on the rituals researchers perform to prepare for an interview, such as choosing appropriate clothing, settings or makeup. Finally, Huysamen's (2018) is particularly enlightening in how she argues that sustaining the dominant performance of the 'respectable researcher' 'produced a defended subject who had a strong desire to manage and control participants' eroticization of interviews, particularly any sexual emotions directed towards' herself (Huysamen, 2018: 10) and how this affected access to information. Huysamen's article concludes:

Although it may be uncomfortable to reflect upon the erotic elements of our research, particularly when we are the objects of the eroticism, it is important that we do. [. . .] it is important to acknowledge that there will be moments in our interviews where our own defenses directly determine and limit the narratives that are produced within our research encounters. (Huysamen, 2018: 14)

To this thought, I add two points. First, that reflecting about being the object of eroticism in research may well be uncomfortable, but it is considerably less risky than reflecting, in writing, about being the subject of eroticism. The scarcity of literature on sexually aroused researchers proves just how risky it can be. Second, I want to challenge the negative assumptions that underlie Huysamen's and many other researchers' writing. While erotic charge may be negative – from harassing to disgusting – it is not always so. Cupples argues, when talking about experiences of erotic charge in her fieldwork: 'I realized that offers of help from male Nicaraguans with my research project could not be seen as "innocent," given that they were often sexually motivated. [. . .] I did, however, sometimes take advantage of such interest and used them to further my research and make connections with places and people' (2002: 386). Immediately classifying any erotic charge as negative and undesirable, risks overlooking how erotic charge contributes to our research process in both negative and *positive* ways.

I want to highlight three positive examples that have acknowledged the presence of the erotic in their research. One is Bolton's (1995) discussion of how his sexual practices, encounters and desires were a key component of his research process when exploring gay men's relationship to HIV in the mid-1990s. Similarly, Race's (2015) insider ethnography of gay men's use of the dating app Grindr is particularly interesting: he explicitly acknowledges his insider status and recognizes that the source material for his work comes from his own personal encounters. A third influence is Dean's work in *Unlimited Intimacy* (2009) where he acknowledges his belonging to the barebacking community he researches and explains how his own encounters and practices have served as the basis for his work.

These examples evidence the potential benefits of exploring the sexual and erotic in research. One approach to this is explained by Orbach:

To protect patients, therapists until recently felt it best to deny or side-step their arousal but [. . .] thoughts have begun to emerge over the last decade suggesting that a therapist might best help her patient if, when she finds herself aroused, she can become less afraid of her responses and keep herself consciously aware of them long enough to think about them privately, rather than banish them prematurely. (Orbach, 1999: 17)

Orbach argues that prematurely banishing the erotic charge as unprofessional precludes more profound understandings of the therapist–client relationship. In a similar tone, Kong et al. (2011) suggest, when discussing about queering the interview, that foreclosing discussions on sexual arousal does not make those emotions disappear.

What it does do, I believe, is render us unprepared as researchers to deal with these emotions. As this subject is rarely discussed or acknowledged in academic literature and training, researchers find themselves lost, or outright ashamed, of their own emotions and experiences. I am not suggesting that we be trained to deal with these emotions robotically or uncritically. I suggest that training prepare us to deal with them when we encounter eroticism during the interview. In fact, the lack of training compels us to ignore these emotions and to leave them out of research journals. It should be made clear that this article is a 'reflection' on my own perceptions and emotions in the fieldwork. I am not attempting to adjudicate feelings, intentions or desires to the participants. Rather, I explore

how my perceptions influenced the research. I do not claim to know or understand the actions or intentions of Josh, Trey and Gallo. Instead, I reflect on how I perceived and understand our interactions.

Overall, with some exceptions such as those mentioned above, scholars have mostly avoided engaging with *being the subjects* of erotic arousal. Kong, Mahoney and Plummer argue: 'It is curious, not to say disingenuous, to find that most research is written as if such experiences quite simply never happen in people's lives' (2011: 15). It seems impossible to engage in research on sexuality from a reflexive stance without engaging with why we do such research or how we feel through and about it. While not particularly reflective, the research above is nonetheless useful in exemplifying the dynamics and negotiations that may happen when conducting interviews and the impact of sexuality in the research process. The following three cases, Josh's, Trey's and Gallo's, provide inroads for the reflexive acknowledgment and exploration of the sexual charge of the interview.

### Josh: negotiating sex

Josh is a 53-year-old epidemiologist from Canada who has been living with HIV since the early days of the epidemic<sup>3</sup>. He is one of the few participants who proactively contacted me to share his experiences: he described himself as having belonged to a community of 'pigs' (uninhibited gay men) since his late teens and early twenties, a community that was ravished by the effects of HIV/AIDS. While he knew he had been infected early on, he never developed AIDS. He is a living archive of the epidemic, as he soon started to work as an epidemiologist and developed a vast sexual and professional network. Josh is charming and explosive: he talks and laughs loudly, he uses swear words liberally and speaks so fast the interview could well have been a monologue. Josh is also a silver-fox: his social media pictures show a muscular man in his fifties, with grey beard and hair, blue eyes and a propensity for tight shirts and tank tops. While he did not identify as a bugchaser *per se*, he acknowledged that having sex with HIV-positive people was 'hotter' and that he would play with the idea of bugchasing in many of his encounters<sup>4</sup>. Overall, his interview was enlightening: he provided a historical background to bugchasing and he proved insightful regarding the influence of PrEP among bugchasers. PrEP is a drug regime consisting of a daily pill of tenofovir and emtricitabine which prevents HIV infection (see Dean, 2015; Felicianantonio, 2017 for a further discussion on the role of PrEP in gay culture).

Josh opens the interview with a 'Hello, gorgeous! How are you?' and, shortly after, while explaining the role of bathhouses<sup>5</sup> in bugchasing, adds: 'By then. . . I should send you pictures, so you can see I was cute. You see? It's important because if you're ugly, you don't get sex, you understand this? So you have to be cute and muscled to fuck.' These instances, the unusual greeting when most participants are shy at first and his suggestion of sending me pictures to prove his cuteness added to his insistence on having a Skype call *with video*. It was clear that the interview was, in part, a sexual game for him: an older, more experienced and confident gay man trying to perhaps shock, arouse or challenge me. The tone, the delivery, the way he angled his camera and lifted his arm over his head discreetly flexing his biceps bore the traits of a flirtatious encounter.



Gailey and Prohaska (2011) have written about how male participants' harassment of female researchers could be heightened by the participants' perception that researchers belong to their same age or social group. In this case, both the significant age gap (I am 24-years-old) and our mutual identification as white, gay men influenced the dynamics. Josh is a 51-year-old accomplished epidemiologist who has interviewed hundreds of men about their sexual practices and yet now finds himself being the interviewee to a novice, younger researcher. His flirtatious outbursts are famed in this context. Josh is trying to claim a degree of control – also through his loud and fast delivery – over the interview setting we jointly create. Later in the interview, while talking about the role of the Internet in bugchasing, this dialogue takes place:

- Josh:** Do you remember chat rooms or are you too young?  
**Interviewer:** I'm too young, I think.  
**Josh (feigning anger<sup>6</sup>):** Fuck you, I hate you. . . I should poz<sup>7</sup> you right now!  
**Interviewer (neutral):** no.  
**Josh:** Look at that face. . . I will, don't worry. So before you could access the Internet like now, you had. . .

Also, towards the end of the interview, as we discuss the role of PrEP for bugchasing, he comments:

- Josh:** Now, every fucking one wants to tell me they're on PrEP. From my point of view, your telling me that you're on PrEP is a big turn-off. Just don't. I don't want to know if you're neg or on PrEP. . . Look at that cute face right now, all I want to know is that the guy looking at me right now says 'do you want to fuck me and cum in me?' and don't tell me anything else!
- Interviewer (smiling and shrugging):** I'm on PrEP.  
**Josh:** Why, you beautiful baby? Don't you want to become poz?  
**Interviewer:** Nope.  
**Josh:** Of course not! You know what? The pills are awful, half the people can't tolerate them. So trust me, anyone willing to become poz is an idiot. But of course, I come from the Auschwitz moment.

These are two explicit erotic outbursts that shocked me and which I found difficult to deal with at the time. Green et al. (1993) argue that, when faced with potentially harassing claims, interviewers have two options: 'the first involves refusing to recognize the sexual connotations of the action and the second adopts the other extreme by openly acknowledging and firmly rejecting it' (634). In the first dialogue, I remain closer to the former option, neutral and dismissive of the advancement, seemingly untroubled by it. Josh perceives this and, after some more pressing, moves ahead with the discussion.



The second example, however, is more complex. At this point, we had been talking for the best part of an hour and I had grown to appreciate the openness of Josh's comments and was rather amused at his delivery. While these *read* as harassing comments, I did not perceive them to be at the time. They felt as performative 'in-yer-face' jokes, not too different from those on a drag queen show.

The second dialogue is perhaps closer to Green et al.'s other approach: by replying to his explicitness with an 'I'm on PrEP,' while shrugging and smiling, I acknowledge his sexual advances but also remain in a researcher position. I evidence that I am listening to his comments and I show command by replying with the exact same thing he had just said he didn't want to hear. His further insistence and my further – still somehow playful – refusal lead to a shift in his narrative. He reveals *a reality* behind his public affirmative bugchasing stance. He suggests that bugchasers are 'stupid' because they do not understand the real implications of HIV infection while he acknowledges that his view is indebted to his past experiences during the AIDS crisis – a time which Goldstein compared to the 'blitz' (Goldstein, 1986 cited in Watney, 1997: 3).

The idea of playfulness is a useful one, as much of these encounters is 'play'. Paasonen (2018) argues, appropriately, that 'sex involves experimentation, quest for intensity of sensation' and unstable body needs and capacities (2). Playfulness is an 'orientation of sensory openness, curiosity and [. . .] improvisation' (2) and play is a 'pleasure-seeking activity that is an end in itself' (132). Thus, Paasonen's work on sex and play can be used to theorize these flirtatious and sexual remarks as a sort of sexual play that does not necessarily have any other end than the pleasure of playing. However, it should be noted, and Paasonen also considers that play can 'push people to zones of discomfort' (8), as it is always associated with a degree of 'vulnerability' (8).

I am not suggesting that researchers should accept harassment. My point is that by playfully acknowledging Josh's erotic advances, I gained access to an alternative narrative about his view of bugchasers and his own historical background which, most likely, would not have been possible with a more detached response. I should also clarify that I replied in these ways intuitively. Even with further training, much of the sexual and emotional affects of the interview remain embodied knowledge. Thus, it is not my goal to suggest that we should be trained to override our bodies, but that we should train to be aware of how our embodied affects influence our behaviour in the interview setting. The interview with Josh is framed in the discussion of sexual arousal started by Green et al. (1993), Gailey and Prohaska (2011) and Huysamen (2018) but develops these to include a more reflexive stance on the role of the interviewer and frames these exchanges as something more than struggles for power. I envision these as products of particular socio-cultural alignments within the interview setting and as productive exchanges. The following case, Trey's, will complicate the idea of productive flirtation while focusing on the researcher.

## **Trey: productive eroticism**

Trey is a 32-year-old escort and former adult performer based in Chicago, where he is well-known for organizing bugchasing sex parties. These are sex parties for people of all HIV-statuses to engage in condomless anal intercourse ('bareback') with the implicit aim

of transmitting HIV. Trey is one of the very few publicly committed bugchasers who consistently appears online in blogs and other outlets supporting the practice. The excerpt I use in this section comes from the final part of the interview. We had been talking about the parties he organizes, and I felt it was time to move to the next section when this interaction happened:

- Trey:** . . . so yeah, that's what it's like. I want everyone to have a good time basically.
- Interviewer:** That makes a lot of sense. Next thing, maybe you should invite me to one of the parties as a researcher!
- Trey:** As a researcher? You can! I have a number of professional photographers [. . .]. And I use this still photographer that [well-known porn studio] uses. So he puts out a very good product, like still photography.
- Interviewer:** For the parties?
- Trey:** [. . .] I invite him to come over to the parties because I want him to be able to film them for posterity or whatever. Or sometimes I want to make people feel like a super-star if you will. I want them to feel good. Desired. Part of the pornographic experience. [. . .] So I would be glad to extend the invite to you as well.

To be clear, I do not want to attend those parties: I have neither an interest in those kinds of events nor a particular liking for the objective of these parties. And yet, I suggested that he invite me to one of them. Why? Perhaps I was trying to release some of the tensions I had gathered during the interview. Trey, one of the most ardent bugchasers I had met, had stated some views and comments that I had found difficult not to challenge immediately. The encounter had been difficult, emotionally draining at times, and this flirtatious remark might have been intended to release some of that tension. These reflections, however, only happened after the interview, while I was transcribing and analysing. At the time of the encounter, I said that sentence thoughtlessly. Interpreting this dialogue simply as an example of poor professionalism overlooks how this interaction is productive in two ways. I suggest that more honest conversations about the sexual in the interview can help us remain aware to these instances and explore them as sources of information regarding the emotions and affects of the setting and how they were constructed by participants *and* researchers.

First, the dialogue evidences that this was an emotionally challenging interview for me and compels us to consider what it is about the content of the interview, its setting or the personal traits of Trey that made me feel so different to, for example, Josh's interview. And second, this flirtatious remark is also productive in how it caused Trey to move from a more abstract language about the aims and goals of the party to the material realities of the event, including the presence of a photographer. This is information that neither had been discussed in the interview previously nor had appeared in existing research. Although seemingly insignificant, the presence of the photographer and Trey's description of his role says a lot about the relevance of these events for the sexual lives and narratives of the attendees and their relationship to pornography. Trey did not

verbally or immediately flirt back. Perhaps it was the certainty that he would not what allowed me to flirt in the first place. I probably would not have initiated this exchange with Josh. Instead, Trey moved to the material aspects of the event, and I wonder whether this is a conscious move on his part to neutralize the erotic charge with factual information or reward my advances with previously unknown insights.

Why I uttered that sentence is perhaps to remain unknown even to me, to be only guessed in an exercise of literary analysis. The affective and embodied reasons are irrecoverable through a written transcript. However, foreclosing this dialogue as a mistake, a slip of professionalism, leaving it out of research articles and writings, does not do justice to its productivity. This interaction points to the emotional atmosphere of the interview and, at the same time, it is the prompt for further discussion of the material conditions and practices of the party, which proved particularly interesting.

## **Gallo: the importance of sincere research journals**

Bolton (1995) writes:

From my graduate school days, I can clearly recall the recommendation that the ethnographer keep two sets of notes, one, fieldnotes proper which contain observations, interviews and so forth, and, two, a diary in which one records one's own thoughts and experiences. I have never been able to follow this advice since it seems more natural to me to relate both simultaneously during the process of writing down information. What I am seeing, feeling, hearing, and thinking all affect how I, as the data-processing instrument, interpret the world I'm experiencing. (Bolton, 1995: 148)

Bolton's memories are not unique, and neither is his difficulty to maintain a fictional separation between information. We have all struggled deciding whether something, a fleeting feeling, a judgmental or erotic thought, merits inclusion in a research journal. For example, Huysamen (2018) writes in her research journal: 'My interview with Dan has left me feeling resentful and panicky . . . what do I do with these parts of the interviews, like where Dan says he'll probably go and jerk off after the interview? Surely this doesn't count as data? Could I just exclude these sections of talk from my analysis?' (9). Sadly, unlike her, frequently our training and the absence of this sort of information on published materials make us not include them, effectively forgetting them. This last section is a challenge to this. It is not based on any dialogue but rather it is the analysis of excerpts from my research journal written immediately after an interview with Gallo. In showing these, I highlight the importance of being sincere in our research journal and of reflecting on the material openly even – or perhaps, especially – when it seems embarrassing or inappropriate. Again, I do not adjudicate any intentionality to Gallo's actions, but rather initiate a reflection on my own emotions and perceptions and their influence on the interview process.

Gallo is a 38-year-old healthcare professional and online adult performer from the USA. He keeps an active online presence through various platforms, where he uploads explicit images and videos of himself, updates followers on his life, receives gifts and answers questions, many of which have to do with HIV and, some, with bugchasing.

While he lives with HIV, he has not disclosed online having contracted the infection through bugchasing. I will analyse two excerpts of the research journal regarding Gallo's interview. The first is focused on the preparation for the interview:

Gallo suggested that we do the interview immediately, as he had some free time. I was working at home in pyjamas, so I decided to change my stripped pyjama top for a short-sleeved black t-shirt. I thought he wouldn't mind my being in pyjamas, but I preferred to maintain the degree of separation/professionalism that more formalwear would provide (3 September 2018)

I am not the first researcher to talk about the politics of clothing when conducting interviews, and I sympathize with Green et al. (1993) when they argue that, at times, our wardrobes cannot keep up with the demands of our roles. Before the interview, I had seen some of the materials Gallo had uploaded online (a standard practice I did for all participants to explore their online presence). Some of these were videos in which he engaged in masturbation while talking with followers or answering their questions. I must say that I found him charismatic, perhaps even sexy and was not surprised that he had a large following online. I also found his views about bugchasing to be very interesting: not only did he had a background in healthcare, but he also evidenced having reflected upon the phenomenon at length. My interest in him as a key informant made me particularly guarded throughout the whole interview. I tried to put on my most professional-detached 'researcher performance' and avoid the intimacy and in-jokes I had developed with Josh or the instinctual flirting with Trey. I also chose a brand-new t-shirt.

The interview went well, at over 90 min in length, and Gallo provided abundant information both about himself and about the kind of dynamics he had seen online. His own healthcare background also allowed me to engage in a more theoretical discussion about bugchasing research. This does not mean that the interview was not erotically charged, though, as my research journal reflects:

I was particularly enthralled by how confident he was, I might even say effortlessly sexy, but also calm and professional. There were two times in the interview when he readjusted his sitting on the chair and I could see that he was wearing no trousers, only maroon boxer briefs. Whereas the first time it was quite casual and accidental, the second time it looked more obvious and I kept wondering whether he was trying to spice up our conversation. He is an experienced performer. If I had prepared my outfit and camera angle, why wouldn't have he? (3 September 2018)

This is a hint, a momentary suspicion, very much the literal flashing of someone's underwear. He is a professional performer who gets a part of his income from online shows and so he is capable of using camera angles, positions, movements and clothing to his advantage. As an adult performer, he knows how to keep the audience enticed. At the time, I thought that perhaps he was trying to arouse me, but I was also aware that him being a healthcare professional, he could also have been testing my own professionalism as a researcher. There are, in the literature mentioned above, several examples of these kinds of behaviour: Green et al. (1993) talk about men readjusting their trousers to expose their genitals and Huysamen (2018) recalls a participant suggesting that he would

masturbate after the interview. In both cases, the researchers felt legitimately harassed and conflicted about the events.

While Gallo's motives will remain unknown, anything from sexual arousal to being too warm at home, *I must reflect on my own reaction to these events*, how I felt enticed to discreetly look at the bottom of the screen to see if I could sneak a new glance at his underwear, or perhaps see if he was erect when he talked about bugchasing sex. Looking back, I wonder just how the subsequent dialogue was influenced by his flashing (intentional or not): did my line of questioning turn more personal to satisfy an aroused curiosity or, rather, did it turn more abstract in an attempt to neutralize any potential erotic charge? This sort of reflection is necessary to assess and frame both the kind and amount of information the interview provided. To do so, I rely on sincere and complete research journal entries: if I had not written it down, after a few days, this event would have turned anecdotal; after a few weeks, a joke; and after a few months, forgotten. If that had happened, how could I truthfully frame his interview, mention his straightforwardness without recalling his sexiness and describe him without acknowledging my own feelings about him?

## Being aware of the erotic

Thomas and Williams (2016) have called for 'self-disclosure [that] can help elucidate the ways that the sexual desires of sex researchers can and do affect research' (92). That is, awareness of our emotional and erotic feelings can be a source of information about the research and methodology. While their proposal includes all stages of research, I have focused upon the interview process. In particular, just as it is accepted practice to reflect on our ethnicity, gender or social class, it is equally necessary to both self-disclose *and* actively and critically reflect on the erotic charge of interviews. This reflexivity could be an active and essential consideration of the process of interviewing and fieldwork more generally, not simply an afterthought when something goes 'wrong' (Huysamen, 2018; Mason, 2002). This reflexivity is also necessary to understand, or at least try to understand, the information obtained from the interviews. Cupples argues: 'Our sexualities, like other aspects of our positionalities, become a source for knowledge and a resource to be utilized and explored' (2002: 384). In this way, the different erotic charges of each of the interviews are a form of knowledge about the dynamics of the interview, my relationship to Josh, Trey and Gallo, and the way in which that information was produced.

Erotic reflexivity, however, is complicated. The first of such complication is the location of the erotic. I have argued that much of the meaning behind some of the flirting or flashing remains embodied in the immediacy of the interview setting and is irrecoverable in its aftermath. In addition, it is clear that the erotic is not always cognitive, and thus may not entirely be available for reflection. It has an emotional and affective aspect to it that makes it slippery. My suggestion is that we try and locate the erotic in the interface between the cognitive and the affective, critically analysing it while also acknowledging that it may be irrecoverable. A second issue is one of ethics. Erotic arousal is tangled with dynamics of race, gender, age and many other categories. Plummer argues: 'sexual stories live in this flow of power' (1995: 26). Thus, erotic reflexivity has an intersectional character.

Third, acknowledging the erotic charge is not synonymous to ‘everything goes’: interviews may become erotically charged but they are not primarily erotic encounters, and it is important to be clear regarding our and participants’ expectations. In a similar light, fourth, we should make sure that the erotic charge is not detrimental to the wellbeing of both participants and researchers. This is done by establishing solid expectations and, when issues arise, referral and safeguarding protocols for participants. This is also done through providing comprehensive training that includes managing the erotic, as well as non-stigmatizing peer-support and debrief. Lastly, we have to create academic spaces where researchers’ disclosures do not cause stigma or shunning from the professional community but rather become points of debate and productive dialogue.

In this article, I talk about the potential productivity of the erotic charge in interviews but I also agree with Kulick (1995) when he argues: ‘I can end by repeating that despite my arguments about the potential for insight that I see in erotic subjectivity, I do not claim that it necessarily provides any insight at all. We are all too aware that sex can be, and regularly is, used to thwart our understanding, quash challenge, and fortify hierarchies of gender, class, race’ (23). Thus, while I argue that we need to actively and critically reflect on the erotic charge of interviews, I do not believe that the erotic will always be productive or ethical. However, without proper reflection on it, we cannot begin to distinguish when it is productive and when it is detrimental.

As Cupples argues: ‘acknowledging the impact of sex and sexuality on fieldwork is fraught with complexities. However, ignoring our sexuality will not make it go away’ (2002: 388). Distinguishing productive from non-productive erotic charge, addressing its ethics and complications, is not possible if we silence these issues and erase them from our writing and records. This erasure is not only misleading but also reckless because it precludes us from identifying risks and dangers and from seeking help when needed. In fact, if we want research about sex that is ethical, complete and safe for all involved, we need to acknowledge the erotic component of our work for both participants *and researchers* (and, even, readers, supervisors, reviewers, editors, grant managers, etc.). To do this is to initiate a conversation, to create a space where we can become better researchers and, as well, happier and saner sexual beings.

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## Notes

1. All names and identifiable information have been modified for confidentiality.
2. I use the term ‘erotic charge’ as a reference to ‘static electricity’. Like a statically charged balloon, you can choose to play with it or neutralize it. Static charge, like erotic charge, can be enjoyable (who hasn’t attempted to put a charged balloon to someone’s hair?) or dangerous (as in electrostatic explosions). Thus static charge can be childish, but also tremendously

serious. And, above all, like the magic of a charged balloon, the erotic charge of an interview keeps us all amazed.

3. The 'early days' refer to the period between the appearance of HIV in 1981 in the United States and the development of effective treatment and testing in 1996. This period was marked by numerous deaths, government inaction and stigma (see Coxon, 1988 and Crimp, 1988 for an overview of some of the research of the time).
4. Josh is HIV-positive but 'undetectable', meaning that, thanks to effective medication, he cannot pass on the virus. Thus, when he referred to 'playing around' with the idea, he referred to co-producing bugchasing fantasies with his partners.
5. Gay bathhouses are commercial spaces for men to have sex with men, see Tewksbury (2002), Bérubé (2003) and Berry (2007)
6. The use of stage directions for transcribing is an influence of the practice of ethnodrama (see Hamera, 2018; Mieniczakowski, 2003; Saldaña, 2005, 2018).
7. Among bugchasers, 'to poz' means 'to infect with HIV' and 'to live with HIV' (as in 'to be poz').

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